

“NO ONE EXPERIENCED WHAT I HAD” (INTERVIEW WITH MIRZA ALIJAGIĆ)

MARKO ZUBAK (ZAGREB)

Mirza Alijagić was a lead singer of the Bosnian pop group Mirzino Jato (‘Mirza’s Flock’) formed in the late 1970s, as a local answer to Boney M. Their first single “Apsolutno Tvoj” (‘Absolutely Yours’) became an instant success and has remained the most successful Yugoslav disco hit.¹ The interview was conducted in Belgrade in 2015.

Marko Zubak (MZ): You experienced a meteoritic rise to stardom during the late 1970s. How did your music career begin? Your road to fame was not typical and neither was your background.

Mirza Alijagić (MA): I don’t think a single ex-YU pop star experienced what I did. This was truly new for everyone, for music critics, for journalists. Literally everyone was in a complete state of shock. No one knew what to do. First came that first single of ours. You know, I am an opera singer by vocation and for me, this whole thing that we’ve been doing was just fun, fooling around, but in a good, positive way. For that first demo record I even called one of my friends to come and sing for me, so that I could first see what is this all about – because I didn’t have the time. The thing is that I was pretty busy at the Sarajevo opera where I worked and had to prepare for the roles. I also went to the music academy, though unfortunately, I never finished, because show business literally pulled me away. I was in a privileged situation at the academy because my status was different from typical regular students. I don’t think any other student had such an arrangement. I took courses which professors taught me outside of the usual schedule. I studied piano, solfeggio, music theory, singing. And I had all that because I was seen as an extraordinary talent. I soon began to sing at different places. I sang on television, in a choir, in another choir, and also recorded some backing vocals here and there, as well as for the annual Sarajevo pop music festival *Vaš šlager sezone* (‘Your Hit of the Season’). And then major Yugoslav pop star Zdravko Čolić called me to sing backing vocals at his Sarajevo concert. That shook me. I was rather blown away, to be fair. He asked me to join him at the New Year’s Eve Concert at the Skenderija, a major sport hall in Sarajevo. In those years, up to five thousand people would come

1 See also Magdalena Fürnkranz’ and Juri Giannini’s article in this volume.

to those New Year's concert celebrations and Čolić wanted to have good vocals around him. The wider public still didn't know me, but I was already acknowledged in certain Sarajevo music circles, though nothing special. Anyway, I was delighted to be invited and sang there. Around then was when I decided to start a solo career. I mean why should I sing only for others, right?

MZ: The Track "Absolutely Yours" by Mirzino Jato appeared out of nowhere and instantly became a huge hit. How did that single come about? Who was responsible for the sound? How and why did you jump on the disco bandwagon?

MA: Well, I was thinking about how I could make an impact, do something really big. Boney M. was huge at the time, in Yugoslavia as well. So, when Zele Lipovača, the guitarist and songwriter with the heavy metal-band Divlje Jagode ('Wild Strawberries') received an offer to compose a few songs, it all clicked together. We also needed some intriguing lyrics to match the tune. At the time, the Serbian lyricist Marina Tucaković was just emerging. She was to be acclaimed in the future and ended up having tons of major hits in her resume. I went to see her in Belgrade. When she saw me, she was stunned: "Wow, Mirza you look awesome!" – she gave me that look. I told her: "Marina, I am here for business only. We'll discuss other things some other time, ok?" [Hahaha] "What do you want?" – she asked me. "Well, I need some lyrics!" and then I sang her the tune. And that's how she wrote "Apsolutno tvoje". The success of the song was very much due to her lyrics. But also, with my voice! If some typical pop singer had recorded it, it just wouldn't have been the hit it ended up being. So, it was a joint effort, though it was Zele who always, more or less, behaved as if he'd done everything. I never argued with it: it didn't really matter.

MZ: Where was the greatest Yugoslav hit actually recorded?

MA: Well, we recorded the demo in an improvised music studio in Sarajevo, run by the sound engineer Nikola Borota. I'd just returned from the theatre from some production, and sang the tune in a hurry. We recorded the whole thing in a matter of hours. That's how the first demo was done. Along with me there were Zumreta Miđić – Zuzi Zu – and Jasna Gospić from the Sarajevo pop group Ambadori. She was already well-known but she didn't know me, and you know, I could be quite slick at times, deft at certain things, when I performed somewhere as a singer, you know [...]. First of all, I was pretty tough, both physically and verbally. I could have a sharp tongue occasionally, and from time to time, I would even punch someone if, for example, some musician became obnoxious. So, I entered the studio and said: "Ok we are going to sing it like this" to which Jasna put her hand on both

ears and eyes, in a sense, like: “Really? Are we seriously singing with this guy? He doesn’t have a clue” [Haha].

MZ: There were some problems getting the track released, right?

MA: Once we’d recorded the demo, in some two to three hours tops, Borota mixed it and together we went to the main Sarajevo state record label Diskoton and offered them the track but they declined it. We went with this demo to all of the twelve major Yugoslav record labels and they all rejected it. That speaks for itself, doesn’t it? Were there really, at these places, the right people employed? Those who understood music and had a feeling for something new and fresh? Well, obviously not. Anyway, this came to me as a shock. I was just at the begging of my career, I was just starting, I was in my mid-20s, and I was hit big time. I received this major blow to my face, which went then straight to my brain. But a few believed. After Predrag Peca Popović, at the time among the best Yugoslav rock critics, heard the demo for the first time, he approached me. Normally, he wasn’t one of those who would sweet-talk you just for the sake of it. But he told me: “Well, congratulations, you are a star now”. I knew who he was, but I didn’t know what he was on about, it really wasn’t clear to me. But he backed it up: “This is for sure the biggest Yugoslav hit of all time!” So, we went once more to Belgrade PGP RTB records, as Borota knew some people there. He pleaded them to print the track in whatever small distribution. And they eventually agreed, but said they could print only some 3,000 copies, no more, that’s it.

MZ: Audiences were immediately interested?

MA: When PGP RTB released those 3,000 copies, I told them that I wished to perform the track on TV, on the specialized TV music show called *Pop ekspres*, created by two young guys from Belgrade TV, with whom I soon became friends, Tucko and Bucko [Branimir Dimitrijević and Boris Miljković]. They were really thrilled with me: first, I was a Bosnian; second, I was funny; and third, I could talk. And they shot this video, and as a back story, told reporters to go to the city and ask people if they’d ever heard of Mirzino Jato before. Who? Who are they? Never heard [...]. Well, then, here you are, this is Mirzino Jato. And at the time, *Pop ekspres* was the best and most popular Yugoslav pop music TV show, with the great line-ups, featuring top music stars plus one new, emerging act. And I was that new rising singer. Oh man, what a line-up that was: Bijelo Dugme, Srebrna Krila, Yu Grupa, Generacija 5, I can’t remember all the names. Unbelievable. Zumreta and Jasna didn’t perform with me then. To be honest, very few believed in the song. Even they didn’t believe in it. So, it was Marina [Tucaković] who actually helped

me find some girls to sing with me on the show. The only ones who believed in the track were Nikola [Borota], Marina [Tucaković], [the journalist] Peca Popović and me. Even Zele didn't have faith. But immediately after the show was aired, pure chaos ensued – literally, a madhouse. I left the studio and stopped a taxi as I wished to go back to Marina's place where I was staying overnight. So, I enter the taxi and the driver immediately tells me: "Oh, man, you won't believe what I just saw on TV. Some guy with some deep, deep voice sang this song!" Ok, I literally froze. I told him – that was me! Well, he nearly bumped into a car in front of us. He hit the brakes, and almost screamed: "Really? Come on, sign me an autograph!" Complete shock! I mean, come on, the record was still not out, I was stunned.

MZ: And once out, how did the sales go?

MA: The very next day we went to PGP RTB records, to get the records, but we couldn't get through as a crowd had gathered and was blocking the entrance. What I didn't know was that the label, in the meantime, had announced that the record would be in the stores the next day. To be precise, in that one particular shop in Makedonska street where their biggest store was located. I still didn't know what was going on. I just saw tons of people waiting. Famous Yugoslav schlager singer Dragan Stojnić, who was one of the music editors at the PGP RTB, turned to me and said: "Come here, I want you to see something." And he walked me to the window facing Makedonska street: "Do you know why they came? Because of you!" And all those 3,000 singles were sold on that day, can you imagine? Unbelievable, a true phenomenon! Such a thing just moves you, gives you wings.

Then they printed another 10,000 copies, then another 20,000 and then again, another 30,000. I soon lost count. I was often at PGP RTB records in Belgrade, and would routinely see salesmen asking for 5,000 copies, for 20,000 copies of Mirzino Jato. I think we received the money for some 300,000 copies. But it was rumoured that the single sold in even greater numbers, and that some copies were lost, which could be true – that's how it was done back in the days. Soon, three or four months later the second single came out. Jasna [Gospić] only recorded studio vocals for the first track, she never performed with us. So, then came Gordana Ivandić, sister of the famous Bijelo Dugme drummer Ipe Ivandić. And then Zuzi joined the band. We had some 280 performances that year. Imagine that! Find me anyone in the world who performed 280 times a year. We toured on ship across the Adriatic coast for three months straight, often performing two times a day. I was walked around like a circus bear and didn't have a clue where we were going, nor what we were doing next.

Mića Marković, an incredible jazz musician and a real gentleman of the shady

Yugoslav music business, once talked to me. He was such a nice guy with great manners. He treated me as if I were his senior, even though I was just a kid. I knew who he was, and would freeze out when I would see him, I just loved his jazz jams, I would like to hear him live now. When he heard me singing, he said: "Wow this is unbelievable, we are pushing this." You can imagine what that meant to me. Though of course there were also those at PGP RTB records who didn't root for me.

MZ: How was the money?

MA: Once I came to Belgrade to sign a contract at PGB records, they say we'll pay you a bit. When I returned to Sarajevo, I'd already spent some money. You know, it cost me to travel to Belgrade, stay there for four, five days – it was not a small expense for me. I didn't earn much back then. So, when I returned to Sarajevo, I went to the bank the next morning. I knew a lady who worked there, she was a fan of ours. I told her: "Please give me some money." She said: "Ok, there is money on your account, how much do you want?" I didn't have a clue how much in fact was there, so I just told her to give it all to me. I thought it was going to be a couple of hundred German marks. But then she said she needed to speak with her boss and went to see him. When she came back she told me the director wished to speak with me. I went upstairs and he told me: "Mirza please, don't take out all the money – I won't have enough to service the clients." "What's he on about?" – I thought. "Well, Mirza, you wish to take 27 thousand marks?" he asked. If I didn't black out then! – You could buy three VW Golfs for that kind of money. The Golf was a good car back then. I got so much money that first time. Not to mention later.

MZ: You had a striking media appearance, was that strategically planned?

MA: Yes, I don't think there was a single TV show in Yugoslavia where we didn't perform. I became the first Yugoslav pop singer to perform live on the main evening TV news. Can you imagine what it meant back then to sing on a national television at the evening news, on that major broadcast of the day? Not on some agricultural show, where singers occasionally made guest appearances. And I sang a complete song, from start to finish. This was my idea, the perfect way to promote us. And I was proven right.

The name of the group was also important. I thought of Mirzino Jato, because of the girls. But it didn't catch on from the start, and I thought it might be changed at one point. But, you know, let it be more girls, more birds, and this is how it eventually stuck. First it was Mirza and the Flock, but that didn't sound right, Mirza's Flock sounded much better. Another thing on which I insisted was fashion. With

my theatre background, I asked for us to have proper clothes. This was quite new on the music scene. We changed our outfits two to three times per show, just for the fans. The girls went to London to buy clothes, or we would go together to Italy and buy some garments there. When I now look at the photographs from 35 years ago, our look is now in, but it wasn't back then. Then it caused a shock, but now it is fashionable and trendy.

MZ: Did Boney M. serve as a model? It seems the track effectively provides local imprint to eurodisco of the 1970s.

MA: That was more or less Zele's idea, he was the one who created the sound. He was in charge of the music. He did research that sound, one must admit this. He was capable of working throughout the night on that perfect sound and he really created it. As far as all that is concerned, he was unparalleled. What's interesting is that for 35 years no one has managed to copy it. We really had our own sound. That combination of soprano, alto and bass just does not exist in the literature of music. It was my idea to have a soprano contrary to such musical heritage, so to form a unique harmony that is hard if not impossible to emulate. I even went crazy a few times. I gave the track to some people who know how to read music, to practice it ahead of one concert and when I came back later, I discovered they still didn't know how to sing it! They said there was no way for them to copy the original. So, what should I have done? Another time we had a big concert in Belgrade at the Pionir Hall [Aleksandar Nikolić Hall] and the show was sold out five days ahead, but our guitarist didn't show up and had to look for a substitute. This renowned Belgrade guitar player, I will not name him, came to rehearse but he couldn't play it. Oh my [...]. I don't play guitar, but I took his guitar and played it for him on a single string and he still couldn't get it.

MZ: How did you juggle your new pop career with your work at the Sarajevo opera house?

MA: Of course, there was some trouble, some jealousy. Along with being a member of an opera choir, immediately, from the very start of my opera career I had solo roles, bigger or smaller. They said I was the best bass ever to come to that theatre. I was Sparafucile in *Rigoletto*, that's the biggest bass role out there. I was Angelotti in *Tosca*, Zuniga in *Carmen*, again a main bass part. I sang in *La Bohème*, and had a minor part in *My Fair Lady*. This was all happening in the same period. But I managed to prepare all these roles. I sang them all very well, but they didn't treat me ok. I can't remember what production it was, but an incredible thing happened once. The whole theatre, the entire crowd stormed onto the stage after my aria and

asked me for an autograph, and the production had to stop. No one expected this. The theatre director told me, “Mirza, please, don’t do this in the future.” Or for instance, I was late for the rehearsal, just five minutes and they began poking at me, messing with me, like: “You can’t do that Mirza.” But, to be honest, I started neglecting the opera then.

MZ: You were the star. Mirzino Jato released another LP in 1983, but then you kind of disappeared, almost as suddenly as you emerged. Why did you stop?

MA: You know that one year was just packed with events. I am telling you, it was pure chaos, the stuff that movies are made of. Someone should really make a film based on these events. For instance, one time I was in Belgrade, I had to perform at the *Nedeljom popodne* (‘Sunday afternoon’) TV show. Shooting was at 10 am, with the broadcast at noon. I told them I needed to fly to Zagreb after and wouldn’t be able to catch the plane, which left at 1pm. And all the PGP RTB production team got up on their feet to keep that plane from taking off. The plane, full of passengers, was waiting for me on the runway for a full twenty minutes. When the car picked me up, we arrived literally in front of the plane, as if I was the president of some country. The crew told the passengers that Mirza will come and they would be a little delayed, but when I entered, they started clapping [...]. Crazy! All that, for more than a year. No one experienced what I lived through. But slowly it became all a bit too much for me, to be honest. I think I’d just had it. I was married, I had a son and when you go on a tour you don’t come home for a month. That was just too much for me.